DEVASTATED SALEM AS SEEN FROM A HYDROAEROPLANE

The above photograph shows the utter desolation caused by the great fire of June 25. The flames swept over more than one-third of the famous city of Massachusetts, destroying many places of historic interest. The picture was taken at a height of about 3,000 feet.

SECRETS OF THE TRADE OF AUTHOR REVEALED BY ENGLISH WRITER

MANY people are lured by some mysterious fascination to try their hands at authorship who have no talent whatever for writing. The result is that the paths of literature are thickly strewn with pitiable failures. Of those who are fitted for the work only a few meet with a financial success, while many who are reckoned as stars in the literary firmament earn but a scanty income from their publications.

That well known Englishman A. R. Hope Moncrieff has just completed his half century as an author, and to commemorate the event has issued a volume through the Macmillan Company called "A Book About Authors." In it he reveals some secrets about the trade of writing and the income of some well known writers.

At first, he says, our hungry authorling is content with a taste of praise; he is even observed to go long on a windy diet of his own satisfaction; but sooner or later he wakes up with appetite for a peck of more solid provender and desires what the Americans call "compensation" for the labor he delights in. And there's the rub! He feels that his indentures to literature should be sealed with gold, not always forthcoming. Sweet is the watchdog's honest bark, and a great many other things are mentioned by poets as most grateful under certain circumstances; yet perhaps if they told the whole truth nothing in their experience has come more welcome—unless the proof sheet—than the first check received for their verses. I knew a highly respectable solicitor who all his life wore at his watch chain a sovereign he had earned in youth as price of an article, fondly bearing it for a charm by which from time to time he could forget the dusty paths of his prosperous career. Again, I knew a clergyman commissioned by a certain princess to write a short letter to the London papers stating the part she had played in three coronations. For this communication one paper sent him an honorarium of eighteen pence, and it was refreshing to witness the pride and joy with which my old friend exhibited the first money his pen had ever fairly earned in three score and ten years. So far has opinion veered since the day when a nobleman or gentleman dabbling in literature abandoned his share of the profit to the publisher, as a busy citizen may bestow on the usher the groat earned by serving on a sheriff's jury. It now appears, indeed, as if authorship tends to become a privilege of the aristocracy, the plutocray and other men of means, who need leave no more profitable calling "for this idle trade."

The first question I would put delicately to untried writers is, What do they propose to write about? They will early have used up their original stock of rhyming addresses to the moon and such like. Their stories are too much in a minor key or strained too high on falsetto notes to get admiring audience. As yet they have gathered little wool by moonlight, and have nothing to spin into fiction but their own threads of fragile and fluttering emotion, with which Arachne herself could hardly contrive a pleasing web. Still less likely are they to have picked up enough useful knowledge to fill their shop window. The best of it is usually some vague idea of copying one or other popular author of the moment. In nine cases out of ten our young author has as yet no promising pigs of his own to drive to market, while he is not sure of the way to his market and quite unaware what a bad market this is in which demand, except for a rare line of wares, will be seldom brisker than supply. I recall one particularly confident bard who sent me from South Africa a small volume of poems very badly printed at Kimberley, along with some opinions of the local press, the most emphatic describing his work as "a mixture of bosh and blasphemy": this revelation of genius he desired me to have at once reprinted in London and to send him the proceeds without delay. That, of course, made a mere miniature of Sir Walter Scott's experience, when from America he had to pay £5 postage on each of two bulky parcels, sent by successive posts for more safety, the contents being duplicate copies of a play entitled "The Cherokee Lovers," which the youthful author desired him to titivate for sale to a British publisher and to arrange for its production on the London stage.

The trustful youngsters who invited me to put them in the way of at once making a living by their bent for writing usually assumed that I have reaped a rich harvest on the fields where they would glean in turn. Let me undeceive them. I thank the goodness and the grace that made me not wholly dependent on my pen, yet I have plied it as industriously as any hack writer in Grub street. After a good many years of diligent work, during which I had kept account of my gains, I had the curiosity to sum them up, with the result that, taking one year with another, I seemed to have made an income of about 100 guineas per annum, and this without setting down per contra many such incidental expenses as books, stationery, postage, office room and general wear and tear of one's necessary equipments, not to speak of expensive journeys that supplied part of my raw material, nor the prime cost of my education in spelling, rhyming, quoting and so forth: items which, in a strictly kept ledger, would overbalance the whole amount shown as profit. May one not say that any clerk in a publisher's who had been as long at the business might look for a higher salary?

Even if authors were apt at keeping account books these are naturally not as open to the public as their other works; but from casual disclosures lately made on this head I can comfort myself by considering how I am not worse off than some more deserving competitors. I see it stated that Lafcadio Hearn, whose work has come into so much admiration in our generation, made rather less than myself, about £100 a year. John Addington Symonds's literary income is put at the same figure; and he was at more expense for culture than most of us. Prof. Church, a diligent laborer, has autobiographically set down his average receipts at £135 a year. George Gissing's "New Grub Street" is a work of fiction which this author was well able to base upon human and other documents; and his account makes but a beggarly one. James Payn, modestly reckoning himself among the first dozen or so of popular story tellers in his time, reports that for more than thirty years he made an average income of £1,500, as to which he does not complain, but justly notes it as small compared with the gains of successful men in other professions.

The case of the poets is notorious: their virtue has in nine cases out of ten to be its own reward. Tennyson's must be taken for a phenonenal instance, who was such a keen man of business or so well advised that he could afford a coronet after ruining three publishers, as the gibe went. Most bards win nothing but a crown of parsley or wild olive; if they make any money it is not till they have sung themselves hoarse; and all their lives they may have to publish at their own expense. I think it was Aubrey de Vere who declared that he could always double his income by laying down his pen, even as a briefless barrister opined that he was sure of being £200 a year to the good by not going circuit. Are there not Crabbes and Chattertons starving among us this day on a succes d'estime? There are no sinecure offices going nowadays, such as that on which Wordsworth lived while the Lakeland Muse, through his most fruitful years, hardly could keep him in shoe leather.

Anthony Trollope was making, for the first ten years of his career, something like the price of his paper and ink, but, to be sure, lived to earn some £3,000 a year. Without beating the bush in surmises, let us take what Sir Walter Besant has to tell us, who ought to know. In "The Pen and the Book" he calculates that there were some thirteen hundred English writing novelists at work, of whom some dozen at the most gained large incomes, and sixty or seventy might reach four figures in their returns, while rather more than twice as many made £400 a year and upward, two hundred had to content themselves with £100 a year or so, and the rest with "little or nothing."

Since then Arnold Bennett has furnished a more cheerful estimate. He states that over a hundred novelists get £300 for every novel they write; that a certain number count their gains in thousands of pounds, and that a handful run into five figures. One popular story teller he mentions as being recently paid at the rate of three shillings a word, or thirty shillings a line, an advance upon the sixpence a word Louis Stevenson could command at the end of his career. One shrinks from mentioning the names of those millionaires, as some of them are merely more or less facile writers who have had the luck or the cleverness to hit a vein of popular taste not likely to be exploited in another generation and in some cases soon worked out.

What are we to say of solid literature, such as in the opinion of some should monopolize this title? The general reader might be surprised to learn how many useful and approved works have to come out at the author's expense, seldom repaid him. His best chance is to be employed by a publisher who keeps an enterprising eye open for what pattern of gossiping history, indiscreet biography or smart writing on things in general will be in brief demand at the circulating libraries. Many a book which would not stand upright by itself will do so as part of a series, which it is the publisher's craft to plan. As a hint of how cheap literary labor is for such undertakings I may mention what a friend of mine imparts to me, a man of university distinction and long literary practice: he wrote for a well known series two volumes requiring historical research, each of them containing nearly 60,000 words, and for each he was paid £25, which comes to exactly the proberbial penny a line, less than some music hall lions get nightly for tickling the ears of the vulgar with a single ditty. Another thriving series of volumes, twice as large, costs £40, I am creditably informed, for the literary labor of each. I have beside me a volume of some 500 double columned small print pages, stuffed full of dull but useful information, the collection of it looking like a good work, for which a slave of the pen was paid £35. One could easily multiply such revelations; but it is enough to say what no one behind the scenes will contradict, that most authors are glad to get anything for their work, and that most books bring their author next to no profit, unless in the experience of loss.

One of my ex-clients for advice comes back to accuse me, after years spent on the paths he has made out for himself. His report is that, what with one thing and another, by pushing with publishers, by waiting on editors, by keeping an eye open for every chance, by sending in a paragraph here and a column there, by despising no job as too petty, by taking no rejection as final, he has after all made nearly as large an income, with more toil, trouble and anxiety, than he might have expected in the occupation which I advised him not lightly to abandon.

One thing the young author must be warned to expect, that pecuniary success is not likely to come to him without industry. He looks forward to daundering about sunny banks and braes where he can at ease pick flowers of sentiment and fancy; but in real life the poet should learn to scorn delights and live laborious days of study, experiment and strictly meditating what may be a thankless muse. Anyhow, there is little money to be made of toying with a facile muse. What the light minded aspirant admires is the irregularity of work which often grants long holidays alternated with labor pushed on as in hot spells of haymaking and harvesting. Many authors do their work much by fits and starts, but the ruck of them prosper only on condition of attending punctually to business.

A book, however long it may have been in incubation, has sometimes to be hatched in haste, by dint of assiduous sitting. The history of literature could be ransacked for tours de force performed by members of this idle gang. Beckford's statement was that he wrote "Vathek" in French with a single spurt kept up through three days and two nights, but indeed from his own correspondence it has been shown that he must have been thinking of but one episode, and that the whole work went through much labor limæ. Johnson, less likely to delude himself, declared that he wrote "Rasselas" in the evenings of a single week, spurred out of his habitual procrastination by need of money for his mother's funeral. Sir Walter Scott finished "Guy Mannering" in six weeks, and we know how swiftly in his broken old age he plied the pen for his creditors. Dumas, making all allowance for "ghostly" assistance, must have been a most diligent scribe before typewriting days. Balzac, when in full blast, would go to bed at 6 and get up at midnight, to work more than a dozen hours at a stretch. I know a lady, by the way, who undertook to translate all Balzac—"the new edition, fifty volumes long"—in three years, and only by a little fell short of accomplishing this gigantic task.

Authorship and journalism, it is said, tend to become fused in our time; but for want of up to dateness the present writer must shrink from dwelling on this topic. His outlook on the literary world, it may be perceived, inclines to retrospective views, whereas the "live" journalist's watchword is "actuality." Forty years ago I facetiously remarked to Oliver Wendell Holmes, "posted up, as you say," to which that genial and cultured host replied with a certain stiffness, "Excuse me, not as I say!" Since then our periodical press has been quickly posting itself in phrases and methods that come mainly from New York and Chicago rather than from Boston. Even the last decade, one is creditably informed, has wrought such changes in the street of newspaper fortunes and misfortunes that the most experienced editor of Delane's or Edwin Arnold's time might find himself a Rip van Winkle among its new men and machinery, all working at highest pressure with a din which might scare those young lions of the *Daily Telegraph* that roared so imposingly for the last generation. I meddle not with matters that are too fast for me, except in so far as denying to the facile reporter with his "scoops" and his "stories" the dignity of right authorship, a craft he has gone far to demoralize by the rattles and corals with which he exerts himself to make that great baby the public "take notice."

Paternoster Row stands on a slight eminence which an old inscription declares to be the highest point of the city; yet in our time it has come to be overshadowed by the lower level of Fleet Street. If the book market be not so brisk as that which has its stalls hard by the latter is largely to blame. Newspapers are handier than books, offer more variety, cater more keenly for the popular taste and can be sold much cheaper. The public spends so much time in reading its newspapers that it has less leisure for books; then our newspapers do not stick at poaching on the preserves of literature, supplying daily articles that take the place of political pamphlets and periodical essays, along with poems, stories, essays, scientific, didactic and humorous matter as well as the latest telegrams and tape reports of the money market. What chance has a grave or even a gay volume against an enterprise that thus grasps every point by mixing the utile with the dulce! The mere author, then, has some cause for looking askance on the prosperous journalist.

Most authors, when one comes to think if it, are blacklegs, men of affairs scribbling in their evening hours, journalists who begin their day with a turn at fiction, retired officers, clergymen, ladies of fashion, millionaires, even kings and queens; all sorts and conditions of men contribute to bring down literary wages by cheapening their work to such a point that they will even pay for overstocking a poor market. Then remember how all approved authors become ghostly blacklegs, haunting the glimpses of the moon in cheaply elegant editions, which are bought in huge numbers at the present day: one is not always so sure of them being read.

The author who has still to keep body and soul together hungrily desires to be bought, but his customers are still less liberal with bread than with stony praise. The last thing your "warm" citizen cares to buy is a book, unless when it comes down to its weight in coppers. He judges it mean not to pay for a bottle of wine, for a stall at the theatre, for a cab, for a bouquet, when he will take any pains to borrow a book rather than buy it. In the average British household the sum spent on literature through the year would hardly make a physician's fee to cure the sequelæ of a banquet the cost of which might fill a bookshelf. Thus flourish the libraries, to which booksellers have to give check by a move of artificial prices that puts new books beyond the reach of most pockets. There is something to be said for the system of joint stock libraries, whence the subscriber can have a wide choice of books without the need of cumbering his rooms with a kind of furniture likely to collect only too much dust. But when a rate paying maker of books is forced to support public libraries at which the neighbors may come by his wares without cost it seems adding insult to injury that he should be invited to take the wind out of his own sails by a contribution of gratis copies. People who make such applications do not perhaps understand how an author may have to pay for his own books, with only a little more discount than is given to the ordinary customer; or if he have books to give away why it is not in the case of a successful performance that deadheads are welcome. The managers of one library wrote me that having spent most of their money on the building they expected me to aid in supplying it with books. I handed this statement to a man of the world whose exposition was that people who dealt in bricks and mortar had to be paid for them, but ink and paper came into a different class of materials.